

On the left, environment is holy

● Bush's policies, however, reflect the view that good stewardship doesn't mean stagnation.

By JON REISMAN

President Bush has been heavily and sometimes hysterically criticized by environmentalists for seemingly everything he does or doesn't do, from new mercury reduction rules and judicial nominations to not playing proper obeisance to the United Nations and international global warming treaties.

There may be near-unanimous agreement on desiring good stewardship and sustainability of natural and human resources, but there is no agreement on what exactly that might mean in practice.

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One side favors market capitalism and limited government over greater public ownership and control of the economy. The other favors a greater emphasis of community over individual, with community also including other species and the physical environment.

Some favor technological optimism and innovation over pessimism and precaution. There is also a split that is essentially religious in nature. For

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some, environmentalism has become a spiritual value system that provides the comforts, community and even the certitude of any conventional faith.

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In a series of initiatives and decisions that took nearly eight years to happen, the Clinton administration left a few political land mines for President Bush in the form of proposed rules and decisions on arsenic in water, mercury emissions, public lands, endangered species and coal-fired power plants.

The initiatives looked to take political advantage of a well-known foible of American public opinion: We want a clean environment, but we don't want to pay for it.

Thus, for instance, New England wants to reduce mercury and greenhouse gas emissions from Midwestern coal plants, but New England doesn't want to pay for it, and for some unknown reason, neither does the Midwest. Whatever President Bush did on these matters would not be helpful to his re-election chances.

So, Bush has pursued an environmental policy based on several core principles that many environmentalists do not share. Those principles include the following:

Wealth makes health. Growing successful economies are essential to environmental quality because they provide both the means and the desire to protect the environment. The worst environmental problems are in the third world; the cleanest environments and highest longevity are in developed countries.

Socialism is not sustainable. Policy prescriptions that decrease private ownership and control of the economy (capitalism) are not consistent with economic growth and will ultimately decrease both environmental quality and human well-being.

Facts, not fears. Careful cost and risk-benefit analysis should govern decision-making, as opposed to emotional fear-mongering designed to "sex up" the case for aggressive intervention. The standard environmental policy agenda-setting procedure is to hype worst-case scenarios and focus on the potential effects on children and seniors rather than the real benefits for all.

Technology and risk. Policies that discourage prudent risk-taking and new technologies out of excessive risk aversion and/or fear of technology (the "precautionary principle" that says even a tiny risk of harm is too much) should not be adopted. Requiring that new technologies prove their absolute safety will condemn much of humanity to poverty and hopelessness.

President Bush is very unpopular with the environmental left because he is promoting policy based on capitalism, markets and sound science rather than socialism, regulation and environmentalism as a religion.

It may be that this November, environmentalists will replace Jewish Americans as the most reliably Democratic religious group.

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